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STUDY WAR ONCE MORE: TEACHING VIETNAM AT AIR UNIVERSITY

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What the military has learned about its role in the Vietnam War can be measured, in part, by what it teaches about the Vietnam War. Indeed, teaching the Vietnam War has evolved over the past 10 years from a narrow case study of Linebacker operations over North Vietnam to an earnest attempt not only to analyze the mistakes made by the military itself in the conduct of the war but to study its relative successes, in the stated hope of making better, more realistic military strategy.

In his 1982 New York Times Magazine article entitled “Vietnam and the Military Mind,” journalist Drew Middleton echoed the hopes and fears of nearly all civilian and military scholars of the Vietnam War when he asked, “How well are the American Armed Forces doing in absorbing the lessons of Vietnam?”<sup>1</sup> Middleton’s question has been echoed by many scholars and critics of the war, military as well as civilian. It is a critical question because what the military has absorbed as Vietnam “lessons” will almost certainly affect the planning and execution of future conflicts. If, indeed, the extent of the military’s learning process can be partially measured by an examination of what is being taught about Vietnam, such an examination is long overdue.

This paper examines one military institution--Air University (AU)--what it is teaching about the Vietnam War, how that teaching has evolved over the 10 years since the end of the war, and what this evolution may reveal about the extent to which military institutions have indeed absorbed or, more realistically, attempted to identify and apply to future conflicts the lessons of Vietnam. If what an institution teaches is a measurement of what it has learned, then this study shows that Air University has made significant progress in its ability to learn from that conflict.

This paper has a secondary purpose. The “quiet revival of interest in Vietnam on [civilian] campus[es] 10 years after the last American troops were withdrawn”<sup>2</sup> has sparked a not-so-quiet interest in the art of teaching the war and a growing number of opportunities (such as participation on this panel) to share teaching experiences. To date, however, the majority of contributions to this new field have come from civilian academic institutions; little, if anything, has been written about how the military’s educational institutions are teaching, in retrospect, a lost war for which they have been partially blamed.

This data gap becomes even more significant when one realizes, for example, that the officers attending the schools within Air University will soon be translating what they learn about Vietnam into strategies for future conflicts. This paper is a first look at the scope, methods, and content of the Air Force's approach to teaching the Vietnam War. This paper will add a military dimension to future research efforts on teaching Vietnam.

### **The Context: The Air University**

What Air University is teaching about Vietnam cannot be understood without a brief explanation of Air university itself and the unique constraints and opportunities it places upon those who design, teach, and seek to draw knowledge from the course hours offered on Vietnam.

Air University, located at Maxwell AFB in Montgomery, Alabama, contains the three primary Air Force institutions of higher (or professional) military education--Squadron Officer School (SOS) for lieutenants and captains (undergraduate level). Air Command and Staff College (ACSC) for majors (graduate school equivalent), and Air War College (AWC) for lieutenant colonels and colonels (postgraduate level).<sup>3</sup> The three schools have different educational objectives, or missions, which reflect the different experience levels and prospective assignments of the officers selected to attend them. These different missions dictate the scope and content of each school's curriculum. Each school's approach to teaching Vietnam, therefore, must take shape within these mission constraints.

The officers attending SOS, most of whom have less than seven years active commissioned service, are given a highly structured curriculum designed to improve their ability to function as leaders, managers, and communicators within the Air Force. They study how US forces are used. They are not expected to know how to command those forces (a primary purpose of ACSC) nor how to develop the strategies for their use (a major task of AWC).<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, the majors attending ACSC, with an average of 12.6 years service,<sup>5</sup> learn to command, manage, and lead "aerospace forces" as well as to understand "the dimensions and roles of the military in a democratic society within the global setting."<sup>6</sup> They are expected to understand why forces are used as well as how to use them effectively.

The development of military doctrine, analysis of military and grand strategy, and the study of “contemporary international and national security arrangements”<sup>7</sup> are the tasks of the senior officers attending Air War College. These officers, who will soon be commanding major force components and developing strategy and doctrine, are expected to be able to analyze the complex relationship between the use of force and the achievement of national objectives.

Thus, Air University is a three-tiered system of officer education that becomes broader in scope of study and more demanding in terms of future leadership responsibility as an officer moves from the undergraduate level of SOS to the postgraduate level of AWC. The mission of each school dictates the scope and emphasis of its curriculum; each curriculum, in turn, constrains, to a certain extent, the scope and emphasis of the hours devoted to the study of Vietnam.

The officers who attend SOS (up to 800 per class) have only 249 hours in an 8.5-week course to study officership, leadership, communication skills, and force employment.<sup>8</sup> Vietnam fits under the latter. In contrast, both ACSC and AWC are 10-month courses. ACSC puts over 500 majors through approximately 750 hours of staff communication, command, leadership and resource management, national security affairs, and warfare studies.<sup>9</sup> Vietnam is addressed only within the warfare studies area. The AWC--broadest in scope, deepest in analysis--studies Vietnam under both its military employment course and its national security affairs course, which are less than a third of its 832-hour curriculum.<sup>10</sup> What is taught about Vietnam, therefore, is constrained to an important degree by both the highly structured curriculums of the three schools and the limited time in which to teach their content.

On the other hand, the three schools offer unique opportunities to those who design and teach the Vietnam course hours. Simply, these opportunities lie in the Southeast Asia experience of the military officers who comprise the vast majority of the faculties and student bodies and the rigorous criteria applied to the selection of the officers who attend ACSC and AWC.<sup>11</sup>

In his brief survey of how the Vietnam War is being taught on civilian campuses, Fox Butterfield notes the “striking” fact that “though nearly three million Americans served in

Vietnam, few professors teaching about Vietnam were ever there.”<sup>12</sup> Air University does not have this lack of experience. Data from the official histories of Air University show the majority of AWC faculty and students and over half of the ACSC classes from 1975 to 1982 served in Southeast Asia.<sup>13</sup> Can participants in a losing conflict teach and learn from that conflict?

Many critics of the military’s ability to learn “lessons” from Vietnam say no. They see service in Southeast Asia as a constraint, making defeat “hard to accept” and leaving the military officer (and, by inference, the military institution) with the “bitter conviction that, had things been run differently, the war could have been won.”<sup>14</sup> This paper offers a different view. The mid-level and senior officers attending ACSC and AWC this year who served in Southeast Asia did not make significant tactical decisions. In short, they had a low level of responsibility for military failures in the field.

Does this “hands on” experience without major field responsibility and coupled with high career performance open today’s military officer and institution to a more realistic appraisal of Vietnam? In the case of Air University, one has only to look at the evolution of lesson plans and seminar guidelines in each school’s curriculum to answer that question with a cautious “yes.” Those documents show a clear trend away from assessing blame and toward a more objective examination of what went wrong in Vietnam.

In summary, teaching the Vietnam War within Air University is constrained by the special purposes and limited time of its three-tiered professional military educational system. Attrition within the ranks of the military over the last 10 years has left a core of mid-level and senior officers who were not major decision makers in Vietnam. The trend toward objectivity that is documented in this study can, to a certain extent, be explained by this attrition.

This paper examines institutional change, not individual course development. It is primarily concerned with identifying broad trends in and plotting significant changes to what has been taught by a representative military educational institution, Air University, about Vietnam over the last 10 years. It uses these findings as a basis for assessing the extent to which this institution has been both willing and able to analyze the military’s role from a different perspective.

## **Teaching The Vietnam War: How Much Is Enough?**

From 1974 through 1979, only the Air War College taught a lesson on Vietnam--a 2.5-hour case study (two-man team briefings followed by seminar discussion) on Linebacker operations over North Vietnam entitled "Tacair in Vietnam." It comprised only 1.4 percent of the 172 hours in the "phase" (course segment) of instruction devoted to studying the employment of general purpose forces. Approximately the same amount of time was given to other case studies of air power in past conflicts such as Korea and the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

Between 1979 and 1982, there was a major increase in the number of Vietnam course hours within Air University. Air War College, always on the leading edge of Vietnam studies, added a two-hour lecture/discussion period in its military strategy phase on the "Strategic Implications of Korea and Vietnam" in 1979. Lessons on Vietnam were introduced for the first time into the curriculums of Air Command and Staff College (1980) and Squadron Officer School (1982).

By the end of 1982, a snapshot of the Vietnam course hours within the AU system looked like this: SOS had introduced a seven-hour "phase" on the "USAF Role in National Security," three hours of which discussed Vietnam in the context of air power and revolutionary protracted war. Compared to the one hour each devoted in that same phase to Korea and World War II, Vietnam comprised 42.8 percent of the phase total (but only 5.4 percent of the total "area" on "USAF and Force Employment").

ACSC had initiated four hours of lecture/discussion and one elective course on Vietnam in the context of limited war and revolutionary strategy. The elective course was a 16-hour offering on the American role in Vietnam. It was offered in all three elective periods and had enrollments ranging from 5 to 20 students.<sup>15</sup> Because it is not a core course, however, it is not figured into the total ACSC Vietnam course hours. Of the 75 hours devoted to the phase on military strategy and doctrine, Vietnam comprised 5.3 percent. Less time--only two hours, in fact--was given to the study of strategy in Korea and World War II. Added to AWC's total of four hours (a reduction in the "Tacair" case study to two hours and the addition of two hours on

“Strategy and the Conflict in Vietnam”), Air University was, by 1982, teaching a total of 11 hours on the Vietnam conflict--an increase of 350 percent from 1978.

The current academic year (1984-85) marks another significant increase in Vietnam course hours at the Air War College. The military employment course added nine hours on Vietnam to its military strategy phase; and, for the first time, the national security affairs course added 4.5 hours on the Vietnam policy process to its national security environment phase. Air University now teaches a total of 26.5 hours on various aspects of the Vietnam War, over twice as many hours as were taught just two years ago and a tenfold increase over the last 10 years.

What conclusion can be drawn from this impressive leap upward in Vietnam course hours within the Air Force’s professional military school system? Primarily one: the numbers chart a growing institutional commitment to study not only the traditional “air power in Vietnam” role, but to devote substantially more time to the strategic and policy aspects of the Vietnam experience as well. Charges by critics that the military has been unwilling to learn more from its Vietnam experience can certainly be tempered by this quantitative evidence.

How much Air University is teaching about Vietnam is important, but does not complete the entire institutional picture. What is being taught in terms of scope and content reveals even more about the extent to which this military university is learning the lessons of Vietnam.

### **Teaching the Vietnam War: Scope and Content**

In analyzing changes to the scope and content of Vietnam studies within Air University, the benchmarks are history, tactics--which in this case are studies of the role of air power--military strategy, and national policy. Major changes in scope and content have occurred at AWC over the past 10 years; most of this section is devoted to examining those changes. SOS has been teaching Vietnam only since 1982; curriculum changes are relatively insignificant so the discussion on SOS is a more static commentary on the course hours as they are today. Changes to the ACSC curriculum on Vietnam are also more subtle than evolutionary as their experience dates back only to the 1979-80 academic year. This school also is looked at more with a view to



what the current lesson scope and content reveals rather than how that content has changed over time. Consideration of Air War College's Vietnam-related curriculum is more extensive.

### **Squadron Officer School**

Squadron Officer School is the shortest in length, least in depth, and youngest in student experience of the three professional military schools within Air University. Its two Vietnam lessons reflect these characteristics in their scope and content.

The three Vietnam course hours SOS offers to its students consist of a 1.5-hour lecture on the air war in Vietnam and an additional 1.5-hour lecture on revolutionary protracted war. The scope covers both tactics and strategy; the content, while limited, is certainly worth content because, in their single exposure to air power in Vietnam, the newest generation of Air Force officers (most of whom were just 10 years old during the Tet Offensive) hear a lecture and read a paper entitled "The Limits of Superiority: Air Power in Vietnam."<sup>16</sup> The picture they receive is surprisingly balanced.

Although the study guide that accompanies this lesson emphasizes knowing the "most effective" air power campaign in the Vietnam War (Linebacker I), it also tasks the students with understanding the lessons learned from the least effective campaign--Rolling Thunder.<sup>17</sup> The reading faults the military for placing "too much faith in its numerical and technological superiority without developing strategies for the proper employment of military power)" It stresses, as does the study guide, the need to learn lessons from Vietnam to apply to future conflicts.<sup>18</sup>

The lesson on air power is followed by a lecture on revolutionary protracted war, which emphasizes the synthesis of Mao's strategy with Giap's Indochina experience, providing the students with their only background to the Vietnam conflict. It traces how the Vietnamese used protracted strategy against both French and American military forces with considerable political effectiveness. Like the lesson on air power, the conclusions of this overview of protracted war<sup>19</sup> roughly parallel the conclusions of recent civilian Vietnam scholarship which takes note of military successes as well as strategic failures.<sup>20</sup> However, the protracted war lesson does not

address the current debate about the nature of the war begun by Col Harry Summers' book *On Strategy*, which contends that the Vietnam War was a conventional conflict from the start.<sup>21</sup>

Taught in limited retrospect, the SOS curriculum on Vietnam evidences some healthy skepticism on the role of air power in Vietnam and a healthy respect for the political success of revolutionary war. Its scope covers selected aspects of both tactics and strategy but not at any length or depth. The form of the lessons is primarily lecture, devoid of outside readings and thin on historical background. But on the whole, what is presented is balanced and objective.

### **Air Command and Staff College**

The scope and content of the ASCS treatment of Vietnam is broader and deeper than that of SOS. In its six years of teaching Vietnam, ACSC has focused its curriculum primarily on the area of military strategy, with significantly less attention paid to tactics and none to the policy process.<sup>22</sup>

Over the past six years there has been only one important change in the scope of the ACSC curriculum on Vietnam. From 1979 to 1982, the four hours of Vietnam study covered two aspects of military strategy-- limited conventional war comparing Korea to Vietnam and revolutionary strategy (with an emphasis on Mao's protracted war). Unlike either SOS or AWC, ACSC discussed the Air Force's Southeast Asia experience with close air support, interdiction, and strategic bombing only in the context of survey lessons on each function.<sup>23</sup> There were no separate tactical case studies on Vietnam. Only an excerpt from Guenter Lewy's *America in Vietnam "The Big Unit War,"* detailing US military operations from 1965 to 1969--provided any historical background to the conflict.<sup>24</sup> There was, and is, no attempt to study policy.

The change occurred in 1982 with the removal of the Korea/Vietnam limited war comparison and the insertion of a two-hour lecture/discussion on the historical background to the conflict--the 40 years of Indochinese struggles which set the stage for the American involvement.<sup>25</sup> With minor modifications to suit individual lecturers, this addition remains today. The content is discussed below. The significance here is the broadening in scope to include a short history of Indochina to provide the setting for understanding US involvement.

This paper's macro view precludes a detailed discussion of the content of each of the Vietnam lessons taught in each of the six years they have been in the ACSC curriculum. It does not, however, preclude the identification and discussion of the major themes present in the ACSC approach to Vietnam. These themes have remained fairly constant over time.

Perhaps the most constant theme in the ACSC's approach to teaching Vietnam was put forward in the "Revolutionary Strategy: Vietnam" lesson in 1980. "Much time has been spent trying to assess blame," said the lesson overview. It is now time to take a hard look at the real situation and try to learn from our mistakes."<sup>26</sup> Whatever ACSC chose to teach about Vietnam, their attitude was, and is, in favor of learning from it.

The "hard look" was confined to two central strategic questions: what was the nature of the war and why didn't the United States win it. In exploring the answers to these questions, the curriculum subdivided into its remaining themes, presenting the American role in Vietnam in the context of the longer-term Vietnamese struggle for independence and entering into an analysis of the military's strategic mistakes.

How did ACSC approach the complex task of explaining the nature of the war? In the first two years (1980-82), they presented Vietnam in the context of both limited war and revolutionary war. Students read an excerpt from an Air Force historical report on Korea and an excerpt from Lewy's book covering the US involvement from 1965 to 1973.<sup>27</sup> The juxtaposition of the two highlighted the faculty's thesis that Vietnam was different from Korea because, although limited in American eyes, it was not a conventional conflict. In fact, the lesson objectives tasked the students with "describing the fundamental differences between Vietnam and previous conflicts."<sup>28</sup>

Any doubt about where the Warfare Studies Department stood on the "nature of the war" debate was eliminated in the second of the two Vietnam lessons, "Revolutionary Strategy: Vietnam." This lesson gave the students three readings which clearly supported the thesis that Vietnam was a revolutionary protracted war: Mao Tse-tung's discussion on the three stages of protracted war, Lt Col Dennis Drew's analysis of Sir Robert Thompson's "People's

Revolutionary War,” and Lt Col William O. Staudenmaier’s provocative study of “Vietnam, Mao and Clausewitz.”<sup>29</sup>

This view remained essentially unchallenged until 1984 when the Warfare Studies Department hosted a lecture by Col Harry Summers, who claimed that Vietnam was, all along, a conventional war.<sup>30</sup> Summers is returning this year to open the ACSC’s Vietnam block with a discussion of the third major theme: What went wrong with US strategy in Vietnam?

As noted earlier, the scope of the Air Command and Staff College’s treatment of the Vietnam War has been focused primarily on its strategic aspects, although some attention has been given to the relationships that ought to exist between national policy and military strategy--relationships which did not exist in Vietnam. Just as we saw an effort to place the conflict itself in the context of a wider but essentially nationalistic struggle for independence, the ACSC curriculum, over the years, has made an equal effort to place our military mistakes in the context of military strategy and military doctrine. Roughly speaking, the ACSC curriculum from 1980 to 1983 concentrated on understanding the nature of the war. From 1983 to present, the focus has shifted significantly to examining why we “won all the battles” but ultimately lost the war.

What is ACSC teaching about strategy in the wake of Vietnam? Primarily, that strategy must be developed in concert with national objectives and executed with the support of the American people--not terribly surprising conclusions.<sup>31</sup> What is important, however, is that an effort is made not to defend a “right” strategy but to find out what went wrong with the one we had--as well as what went right.

In examining the content of the current lesson’s major reading assignment, *People’s Revolutionary War*, by Lt Col Dennis Drew, an accurate picture emerges of the school’s view of what the Vietnam experience should teach us about traditional Air Force doctrine. What that means for the development of military strategy is less clear. The discussion is entitled “What Can Be Learned?”

Drew argues that the Vietnam War “reaffirmed” the importance of clear-cut objectives, sea power, and air power. Less certain (in light of the debate over the nature of the war) is the

“appropriateness” of a big unit war or the “so-called strategy of gradualism.”<sup>32</sup> These questions are raised, not answered. Drew’s final point, and one that ties his discussion of doctrine back to questions on strategy, is perhaps the most important but least addressed in the ACSC curriculum on Vietnam: that “political control of the military in Vietnam was a natural continuation of a well-established trend... present in all of America’s wars.”<sup>33</sup> If so, then even if one can identify the nature of the war and even if appropriate strategy can be designed to win it, what limitations will the American political system impose on its execution? This review indicates policy studies are not currently within the scope or mission of ACSC. Whether they should be is another question.

In summary, the Air Command and Staff College’s treatment of the Vietnam War has been primarily focused on strategic aspects. It has, however, balanced that narrowness with an honest attempt to open to debate and critique both its discussion on the nature of the war and an assessment of strategic mistakes and successes. The main strength of the ACSC curriculum is in its contextual approach to the war--Vietnam as part of a long-term revolutionary struggle. This approach backs the military student away from the more emotionally charged “communism versus freedom” perspective and highlights the complex nature of the war. It also serves to make students and teachers alike much more cautious in advocating a strategic quick fix (“Linebacker in 1965 would have won it”) to the Vietnam paradox of winning battles and losing wars.

The school’s approach to the war has weaknesses as well: lack of “outside” readings; little, if any, seminar time for the students to discuss the concepts presented in the lectures; and a certain unwillingness to tackle the issue of “limited war” from the perspective of designing strategies to meet limited political objectives in a conflict situation. The implication one draws from the conventional war/revolutionary war debate and the school’s position that Vietnam is “different” from other wars is somewhat unsettling for two reasons. First, regardless of where one falls in the debate, serious doubts are cast about the ability of the present US force structure and political system to deal with either a conventional or a revolutionary war that is still “limited” from the American perspective. Second, Vietnam-type wars are clearly the shape of conflicts in this century. Taken together these critiques point to a need to study American strategies for limited war at least as much as we study revolutionary or conventional strategies for unlimited ones. Despite these weaknesses, however, Air Command and Staff College, given its

structural and mission constraints, has provided its students with a solid and objective basis by which to evaluate and learn from the Vietnam conflict. Significantly fewer constraints apply to the Air War College's ability to teach the Vietnam War.

### **Air War College**

Major changes have occurred in the scope and content of the Air War College's curriculum on Vietnam over the past 10 years. The extent to which Air University as an institution has been willing and able to identify and learn from the military's Vietnam experience can best be measured by what it teaches to this highly select student body. As this paper has shown, the Air War College teaches the most hours on Vietnam and has been on the leading edge of the two major increases in course hours mentioned earlier. In scope and content, the AWC's record is the same. Because this paper is a macro view of broad changes and thematic trends, a complete content analysis of all course materials is not appropriate. After a survey of the major changes in scope from 1974 to the present, this study limits its content analysis to a comparison of the "Tacair" case studies of 1974 and 1984 to mark relative change over time and a detailed look at the Air War college's 1984-85 lessons in Vietnam.

From 1974 to 1979, the scope of the AWC's Vietnam effort was solely tactical. The only facet of the war studied was, appropriately enough, a case study of Khe Sanh (until 1976) and Linebacker operations. This lesson is a "staple" of the Military Employment Department but has slowly adopted an increasingly tempered view of the "decisiveness" of air power in Vietnam.

In 1979, the "Tacair in Vietnam" case study was joined by a new two-hour lecture/discussion on the "Strategic Implications of Korea and Vietnam."<sup>34</sup> The students read Morton Halperin's article, "The Limiting Process in the Korean War."<sup>35</sup> They were asked to "comprehend the shift in the US strategic thought process following World War II as manifested in Korea and Vietnam."<sup>36</sup> The lecture/discussion that year was given by Professor Lawrence (Buck) Grinter and Sir Robert Thompson, the noted expert on people's revolutionary war, who talked about the strategic implications of the Vietnam conflict and provided historical background as well as adding to Halperin's strategic focus, although from quite a different

direction. That lesson, too became fixed in the curriculum and served to broaden the scope of Vietnam studies from tactics to strategy to history. The final and unique push outward in scope came this academic year when the Department of National Security Affairs joined the Vietnam teachers for the first time with a 4.5-hour block on the policy process.

Only the “Tacair” case study has been taught steadily over the last 10 years, and it provides us with a good roadmap to follow when attempting to plot changes in the content of the AWC’s Vietnam lessons. In 1977, the “Tacair” case study contained the following objective: “Comprehend the employment of SAC weapon systems in a conventional bombing mode and assess the degree of success and lessons learned during the Linebacker II operations.”<sup>37</sup> In order to do this, the students were provided with a 50-page case study book that contained 26 articles (mostly from military magazines), 23 of which testified openly to the “decisiveness” of the air campaign and one which criticized SAC for operational ineptitude when planning the air strikes that resulted in high aircrew loss rates. The remaining two articles rebutted the charges of the single critical article.<sup>38</sup>

The students were asked to assess only the degree of success of the campaign. There was also a tasking to identify “lessons learned,” but the readings were clearly pointing them toward validation of the decisiveness of air power and a critique of “politically imposed restraints” and lack of a “strategy for victory.”<sup>39</sup>

In contrast, the 1984-85 version was considerably more balanced in its approach to the role of air power. The laudatory magazine articles were replaced with four readings that gave detailed historical background on the whole air war and evaluated, with mixed results, the various air campaigns in terms of their success or failure in interdiction, close air support, or strategic bombing. Students were asked to place the evidence gathered about the relative successes and failures of air war against current Air Force doctrine. They were then asked if the doctrine should be changed.<sup>40</sup>

It is highly unlikely that any Air Force study of air power in Vietnam would conclude it had no effect on the enemy. But the change in tone and content of the “Tacair” lessons during

this 10-year period at least showed air power was certainly not a total success; and it directed the students to understand air power's limits as well as its utility in a much broader historical and tactical context.

I would like to confine the rest of this content analysis to what is being taught today at the War College because this academic year, more than any other in the senior school's history, represents a major upgrade in teaching the Vietnam War. In the previous academic year, the Air War College taught a total of four hours on Vietnam. This year it teaches 17.5, over four times as many. Two readily identifiable explanations for this change come to mind. The first is the addition of the 4.5 hours on policy offered by the National Security Affairs Department. The Air War College, unlike SOS and ACSC, is charged with teaching its students about the formulation of national security policy.<sup>41</sup> The Vietnam period was a significant gap in that responsibility and the department moved to fill it. Why now? I would argue that time and attrition have blunted the military's traditional reluctance to approach that aspect of the war of which they had the least control and the most contempt--the policy process. One could only fault the War College for not teaching it sooner.

The second reason for the leap in total hours was the result of a combined National Security Department (3 hours) and Military Employment Department (5 hours) effort to bring key Vietnam military and civilian decision makers to the college. For eight hours during the second week of September, the students and faculty listened to Robert Hilsman. Robert Komer, Buck Grinter, Col Harry Summers, retired Gens William B. Rosson (USA) and John W. Vogt, Jr (USAF), and retired Adm Roy O. Johnson (USN) give their often contrasting perspectives on Vietnam.<sup>42</sup> These presentations were unusually candid and critical of civilian and military policies alike. They were also remarkably consistent in one significant respect--all called for the military to become more involved in the policy process with better and more timely strategic advice. An interesting question and answer period followed. Students' questions from the floor were far less emotional than this author expected and, on the whole, revealed a lack of either preconceived ideas or detailed knowledge about the larger military/political issues of the war. Curiosity about these issues, not burning inquiry or fixed ideology, may be the hallmark of today's military leader, whose Vietnam experience was brief and youthful. This may be good for



learning. One can speculate, however, further attrition within the ranks may significantly diminish interest in Vietnam as it seems to have done with Korea.

Four themes seem to predominate in the Military Employment Department's course hours on Vietnam. The first is an echo of what guided the SOS and ACSC approaches to the war: a dogged determination to analyze objectively and derive lessons from the military's failure to win the war. In each of the four lessons ("Revolutionary War," "Military Strategy in Southeast Asia 1961-1975," "Executing Military Strategy in the Vietnam Conflict," and "Vietnam War: Military Strategy . . . Ours and Theirs") the desired learning outcome is the same--explaining both North Vietnamese and American/South Vietnamese strategies in terms of their successes and failures. In short, identify lessons to be learned.<sup>43</sup>

The second theme also parallels the conclusions of both ACSC and SOS: Vietnam was a revolutionary, protracted war, not a conventional one. There is, however, one significant difference at the War College. There, greater recognition is given to the growing incidence of revolutionary wars in this century, implying Vietnam was not an aberration but a new form of conflict.

The third theme--the importance of the process of strategic analysis--supports the emphasis of the second. Time and again, throughout this examination of course material on Vietnam, the infamous "paradox" raises its head. As guest lecturer Col Harry Summers asked the Air War College Class of '85, "Why did we win all the battles but lose the war?" Analyzing the strategic successes and failures of both sides is one logical way to begin to resolve that paradox. The analysis becomes even more important when, as these lessons imply, the future use of American force in conflicts similar to Vietnam cannot be ruled out.

Recognition, but little more, of the political limitation placed on military strategy is the fourth, minor theme in the series of lessons. Two retired generals and one former admiral, all of whom were key military leaders Vietnam, decried these limitations. One of the key readings in the lessons, Guenter Lewy's recent article, "Some Political- Military Lessons of the Vietnam War," sees political limits as understandable and unavoidable. Nothing in the lessons, however,

pushed the very thorough and objective analysis of strategy up against these political constraints.<sup>44</sup>

On the whole, the nine additional hours added to the Military Employment Department's treatment of Vietnam were well spent in a robust analysis of American and North Vietnamese strategic successes and failures. The lessons transition almost dialectically from contrasting revolutionary strategy with the historical record of American strategy, to identifying the resultant "errors" that led to the North Vietnamese victory, and finally, to attempting to derive lessons for reformulating future US military strategy.<sup>45</sup> This is a worthwhile approach. It is weak only in the last step, where rather one-dimensional "lessons" instead should be reworked as more flexible hypotheses. For the officers who attend the Air War College, only one other endeavor could be more appropriate--a parallel understanding of the Vietnam policy process that both shaped and constrained those strategies. This year, for the first time, they were given the opportunity to learn about that critical process.

The National Security Affairs Department joined the Vietnam teaching ranks this year. Its themes, though not well developed, are easily grasped by military officers whose conception of the policy process that began and sustained our involvement in Vietnam sometimes hovers between contempt and confusion: how we got in, how we got out, and what we learned from the experience about policy making. For 3 of the 4.5 hours, these themes were debated by Roger Hilsman and Robert Komer and challenged by the audience.

How did we get in? The Air War College approach is a safe and standard one: using Guenter Lewy's "Roots of Involvement" chapter from *America In Vietnam*, to trace American Involvement In the war to the "underlying assumptions of flexible response strategy, as well as those of [our] defense, foreign and domestic policies."<sup>46</sup> It is important to note here that AWC (and ACSC) uses a model of national strategy that explicitly relates national interests and objectives to policies.<sup>47</sup> This model, taught earlier in the year but recapped In the first Vietnam lesson, is extremely helpful in linking the major assumptions of flexible response and containment--the fear of "losing" Indochina to communism In the wake of China and Korea, the

fear of unchecked aggression, and the casting of threats solely in terms of the global Soviet-American struggle--with policy decisions on Vietnam. The Lewy excerpt highlights this well.

The second theme, why we got out, explored the controversial policies of Vietnamization and pacification via a three-hour lecture/discussion with Hilsman and Komer. The department study guide and readings developed this theme somewhat thinly, relying more on the lecture for substance. The department attributed our policy of disengagement to the inevitable consequences of the “erroneous assumptions” policymakers made in the context of global containment. Students were expected to be able to “illustrate the problems the erroneous assumptions caused for [policy implementation],” meaning, of course, the increasingly unwelcome attention policymakers in Washington were paying to the “conduct of military operations.”<sup>48</sup>

The third and final theme is the recurring call to learn “lessons” from the American experience in Vietnam, in this case from policy rather than strategy. Again, the focus is balanced between identifying what policymakers did right and what they did wrong. What went right with US policy? Two things. First, policymakers related national policy to national interests and subsequently devised a strategy to attain those interests (identifying the correct process if not the correct situation). Second, although they did “not pay sufficient attention to ensuring public support for US involvement” in Vietnam, policymakers eventually “bowed to public opinion in moving toward disengagement.”<sup>49</sup> Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts come to similar conclusions in their book, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked*, unfortunately a suggested but not required reading for this lesson.

What went wrong with US policy comprises a longer list. The National Security Affairs Department teaches that major errors were made in assessing the threat to US interests in Vietnam as primarily a Soviet one. Casting Vietnam in terms of the larger East-West conflict “distorted the complexities of the situation and caused the United States to attach a higher priority to Vietnam than it probably deserved.”<sup>50</sup> Policymakers also erred in “not involving the American public sufficiently” in their growing commitment to the war.<sup>51</sup> While the study, guide does not specify what sufficient involvement would have been, the most likely interpretation would be a large call-up of reserves and perhaps, a declaration of war--an argument made by

Summers as well as most former, military leaders. The Air War College also faults the policy process for not being “attuned to the realities” of the nature of the Vietnam conflict, which is identified as “a civil conflict between competing Vietnamese factions.”<sup>52</sup> Taken together, these criticisms of the American policy process are cautious, but objective. They do lack depth, however, as the department fails to underscore its lectures with any reading other than Lewy and Robert Scalapino’s short article on the low tolerance of our political system for “protracted, limited wars.”<sup>53</sup>

For a first cut, the lessons on the policy process show their greatest strength in the caliber of speakers and the concerted attempt to give rationality and coherence to a policy process that ultimately produced a policy failure for which the military has often been blamed. The department has been scrupulous in its attempts to keep the policy focus from sliding off into an apology for the lack of strategy and the examination of the rights and wrongs of policymakers from turning them into scapegoats. “Great care should be exercised,” the accompanying seminar guide cautions the student leader, “to keep the focus on the formulation of US national strategy. In view of the deep feelings of most of the students about the Vietnam experience, there will be a considerable temptation to wander off into assessments of military strategy...”<sup>54</sup>

In sum, this course is still thin in required readings, but it has taken a tried and true track in its first attempt to teach the policy process.

Since the Air War College’s Vietnam curriculum is really the centerpiece of the Air University’s approach to teaching the war, an assessment of its strengths and weaknesses will, to a large extent, assess those of the Institution as a whole. Therefore, having examined what has been taught about Vietnam at three different levels of professional officer education in terms of numbers of hours, scope, and content of those hours, we can combine these findings into a concluding assessment of the extent to which Air University has been both willing and able to teach the Vietnam War.

## **Conclusion**

“In the long run,” writes Guenter Lewy, “even more damaging to America’s position in the world than the actual failure to achieve our objectives in Vietnam could be the unwillingness and inability of the military institution to understand and learn the real lessons of Vietnam.”<sup>55</sup> The evidence here proves Lewy’s critique to be unfounded and even unfortunate if he represents the views of the leading civilian Vietnam scholars on the military’s present attitude toward the Vietnam experience. The scope, content, and course hours devoted to teaching the Vietnam War over the past 10 years within Air University clearly prove that this military institution, at least, has been both willing and able to “learn the lessons of Vietnam.”

This paper began with the assertion that what the military has learned about its role in Vietnam can be measured, in part, by what is taught about Vietnam. What Air University has accomplished in its efforts to put the Vietnam War in its core curriculum is impressive and, until now, totally undocumented. If teaching measures learning, then this military institution’s learning curve on Vietnam is high. It is not easy for participants in a losing war to teach the mistakes made in that war to fellow participants. Within its time and mission constraints, Air University is meeting that challenge in all three of its professional military schools for officers.

Since 1974, there has been a tenfold increase in the number of course hours taught on Vietnam, a steady broadening in their scope, and a sustained effort to make their content balanced and objective. The concerted effort to cast every one of the course hours in the light of “lessons learned” should draw sighs of relief from Guenter Lewy and his fellow Vietnam experts/military critics. They may not agree that Air University teaches the “real” or the “right” lessons (a major weakness of this methodology that is briefly addressed below); but, in all honesty, they should applaud its effort.

This effort still has weaknesses. Although Vietnam course hours compete in a zero-sum game with the teaching of such current and critical military issues as strategic and conventional force employment, regional and national security studies, management, leadership, and space studies, there is still room, within the existing course structures, for some conceptual improvements.

The schools have not come to grips with limited war as it was fought by the United States in Vietnam. Their strategic analyses of the successes of protracted war get better as one progresses up the school hierarchy, and so does the attempt to analyze our military mistakes; but there is not much done with the mismatch. Even if we understand the nature of protracted war and even if its “type” is acknowledged to be the war of the present and future, the Implication seems to be we ought not to fight it or we should upgrade the conflict to one that matches our current heavy conventional force structure so we can win it. Neither position is satisfactory because neither recognizes that first, American military participation in low-level conflict may be unavoidable and second, it will most likely be executed within stringent political constraints. There needs to be more recognition of this reality in both the strategy and policy approaches to the war. This would be an excellent subject for a joint Military Employment Department/National Security Affairs Department seminar.

It is also somewhat disturbing to find, despite the effort to teach its own military students how to be better strategists in the light of the Vietnam experience, there is little attention paid to the political role that must be played by military leaders in “selling” that strategic advice to policymakers in times of mounting tension. Early in the Vietnam conflict military leaders were asked for strategic advice on what to do to maintain a non-Communist South Vietnam. The Joint Chiefs of Staff have been criticized for the poor quality of their response. Being able to formulate sound strategy is the mark of a good military leader; gaining the confidence of the civilian leadership to execute it relatively unhampered in today's nuclear world is military leadership at its best. Future military leaders attend Air University. They need to study how to do both.

The strengths of the Air University's Vietnam curriculum have already been highlighted in the scope and content analysis that comprises the bulk of this paper; they certainly outweigh the weaknesses. This study has documented a sustained effort on the part of Air University to insulate its Vietnam lessons from the bitterness, alienation, and scapegoating that marked military attitudes in the immediate postwar period. In close parallel with civilian colleges, the Air University's approach to Vietnam has avoided assessing blame and concentrated on objectively assessing facts. The “hands on” Vietnam experience of both students (with the exception of the junior SOS officers) and faculty, gotten when most were too junior to be held responsible for policy decisions, seems to be a major factor in the success of this effort.

But is “commendable level of effort” enough to pass favorable judgment on the Air University’s teaching of the Vietnam War? It might be if this teaching were a typical military exercise. It is not. Air University is a military academic institution and must be evaluated on its scholarship as well. Are the conclusions drawn about the Vietnam War within this institution congruent with those drawn from the best of current research? The answer may be something of a surprise to both the military and civilian communities: there is indeed a high degree of congruence between what is being taught at Air University and what is currently the leading edge of the “new Vietnam scholarship.”<sup>56</sup> Air University seems to be both teaching and learning, contrary to Lewy’s accusation, the “right” lessons of Vietnam.

Air University and civilian experts are in closest agreement on at least six main points. First, we had no strategy for victory that fit the “revolutionary” nature of the war; attrition simply did not and could not work.<sup>57</sup> Second, despite its inappropriate military strategy, the US military achieved some considerable successes that have too often been overlooked.<sup>58</sup> Third, slow escalation, or “gradualism,” was, on balance, no more successful than attrition and was indeed detrimental to the military effort in Vietnam.<sup>59</sup> Fourth, the real enemy was North Vietnam, not the Vietcong in the south, and it is their strategies that should be closely studied.<sup>60</sup> Fifth, military strategy without clear political goals will be unable to achieve success and will slowly lose public support.<sup>61</sup> Sixth and finally, there is a joining of the spirit between this military institution and its civilian counterparts in the expressed need to learn “lessons” from this conflict, and a word about this perceived methodology is appropriate here.

The lessons learned approach may raise more problems than it resolves because it suggests static, specific conclusions stated as flat truths. There is little agreement in the literature about what those lessons are; and since every article and lesson plan seems to call for them, the results are endless lists of “how to’s” of the warfighting business. These lists are not substitutes for analysis, nor can they be reliable guides for the future--witness Lyndon Johnson’s application of the “Munich analogy” to Indochina in the mid-1960s. What one can best learn from studying Vietnam, I would argue, are not lessons, but processes of analysis. In the long run, it may be

better that that infamous Vietnam paradox of winning the battles and losing the war remains unresolved. Its very complexity may eventually wear down the rather futile lessons learned approach and generate a greater appreciation for and greater skill in the art of strategic analysis.

In utilizing the lessons learned approach, however, Air University only reinforces the extent to which its approach to teaching the Vietnam War reflects a growing consensus between the military and the civilian academic and professional communities about the meaning of the Vietnam experience. This is a trend that speaks well for the future and is, indeed, a long time coming.

What does this study say, in the final analysis, about the ability of a military institution learn from its mistakes in Vietnam? It says Air University has been both willing and able to do so and to teach what it has learned.



## **EPILOGUE**

This paper was presented to the Southeast Conference Association of Asian Studies at Duke University on 19 January 1985. As a first-time paper presenter and the only non-PhD on my panel, I was very pleased with its reception.

Bui Diem, former Vietnamese ambassador to the United States, was in the audience, as was researcher Anne Boggan from NBC. Ambassador Diem and his colleague, Professor Nguyen Manh Hung from George Mason University, praised the paper's scholarship and insights into the problems of the military's approach to limited war. Boggan asked for a copy of the paper to use in NBC's upcoming 10-year retrospective on Vietnam. I was also invited by next year's conference chairman to present a paper on the military's approach to the lessons of Vietnam. My panel colleague, professor Gerald Berkely, invited me to guest lecture to his Vietnam class at Auburn University in March.

I was most pleased, however, to note the great deal of interest, agreement, and acceptance given to this study, and to me as a military officer, by what has been our harshest Vietnam critics--the civilian academic community. Many of the professors in the audience admitted to me after the presentation that they had been Vietnam War protestors. With the exception of myself and my advisor, Maj Earl (Butch) Tilford, there was not a veteran or military member in the audience. This reception reinforced a major conclusion of my paper--the growing congruence between military and civilians about what went wrong in Vietnam.

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